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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that among the obstacles to success in implementing shared decision making is finding ways to negotiate the inherent power differentials and traditional role expectations among the various stakeholders. This paper describes the methods developed by district-level planning teams to "even the playing field" and to promote authentic dialogue among stakeholders on their teams. District planning teams were charged with designing comprehensive shared-decision-making policies that they felt would work best in their districts. Twenty design teams from 20 New York school districts developed "rules of the game" that first allowed them to equalize power relations and then to develop methods they felt would promote true shared decision making at the school level. The teams engaged in a structured participatory action-research process to develop and address a set of key questions to guide their site-based-management processes. The planning teams developed guidelines in response to key questions in the areas of focus, scope, structure, process, and support. One table is included. (Contains 70 references). (LMI)

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Creating a Level Playing Field: Structuring Shared Decision Making to Promote Authentic Dialogue

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Since the beginning of the second wave of the current reform movement, there has been widespread agreement that the school should be the center of change and improvement activity (Sirotnick 1989). Adoption of site based decision making has been widespread, although studies show that there is seldom an explicit connection between the practice and student performance and achievement (Cohen, 1988; Murphy and Beck, 1995; Taylor and Bogotch, 1994). Likewise, studies fail to show much support for the connection between the implementation of site based management and intermediate benefits such as improved staff morale, stakeholder influence, and the use of quality planning practices (see, for example, David, 1989; Lindquist and Mauriel, 1989; Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz, 1990a; Murphy, 1993; Ogawa and White, 1994).

Research has shown that among the obstacles to success in implementing shared decision making is finding ways to negotiate the inherent power differentials and traditional role expectations among the various stakeholders (for a review, see Malen et al., 1990b; Malen and Ogawa, 1992). A national survey done by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory revealed that over half of the respondents felt that resistance to changing roles and responsibilities is a barrier to restructuring (Duttweiler and Mutchler, 1990), and Kushman and Shaughnessy (1996) reported that in the districts they studied, despite concerted efforts to promote inclusion, students, parents, and community members serving on site councils felt like outsiders. Much has been written on the role changes associated with the principalship in restructuring schools (see David, 1989 and 1990; Hatry et al., 1993; Ford, 1992), and the need for principals to shift from

supervisor and sole decision maker to collaborator, enabler and facilitator. Changes in teachers' roles are also the focus of a great deal of research, no doubt in recognition of the fact that shared decision making -- or any other reform, for that matter -- cannot result in changes in teaching and learning if teachers' behavior remains the same (see, for example, Weiss et al., 1992; David, 1990; Gomez, 1989).

Kushman and Shaughnessy (1996, p. 27) raised the question, "How do you reach out broadly to include stakeholders without creating large, unmanageable school restructuring groups?" In this paper, we will describe the methods developed by district-level planning teams to "even the playing field" and promote authentic dialogue among stakeholders on their teams, and the plans they developed for doing the same on school-level shared decision making teams in their districts.

Framework

The overwhelming explanation offered in the literature on existing site based management programs is that districts and schools seldom fully implement the process (Marsh, 1994; Wohlstetter and Odden, 1992; Wohlstetter and Mohrman, 1994). Issues of "insufficient capacity" are often cited as explaining the failure of site based management. "Capacity" equates to district support for site teams in terms of providing authority, training, time, information and other resources necessary to team operation. Districts rush to implement site based management without considering what it takes to make the transition from traditional decision making structures (Glickman, 1990).

Malen, Ogawa and Kranz (1990b) observe that although site based management may results in a greater degree of involvement, it does not necessarily result in greater

policy making influence among participants. The relative power of principals to teachers, and school staff to patrons tends to be unaltered. Councils typically address peripheral issues or issues that have been decided elsewhere. Meeting agendas are controlled by principals. Informal norms dictate team roles: principals set policy, teachers deliver instruction, and parents support professional decisions. Discretion is circumscribed by district or state policy, and even when councils have substantial influence, this tends to be limited because districts do not provide the resources to allow them to reach their capacity. In other words, even if authority is devolved, lack of training, information, time and other resources results in councils having a limited impact on policy making.

Although researchers emphasize that there is no single recipe for successfully implementing site based management that works in all districts or schools (Ogawa and White, 1994; Sharpe, 1996), there are few systematic discussions about the alternative approaches pursued by actors or how these action alternatives are selected. A single model of site based management dominates the literature, resulting in a bias toward defining the process in terms of whether authority over budget, staffing, and curriculum is devolved to the school level. The complexity of site based practice is reduced to a handful of simple factors, and site based management is judged to be adequate in terms of the existence of these attributes. Adoption of shared governance has tended to follow the American tendency to "package, simplify, and sell (Glickman, 1990, p. 72)," or to paraphrase Metz (1990, p. 142), the garment of site based management comes in "one size fits all."

The literature on site based management seldom addresses planning and

implementation (Miles and Louis, 1990; Cotton, 1993), focusing instead on reviewing extant programs in terms of their progress in meeting stated goals (Malen, 1993).

It is argued here that the emphasis must shift to a focus on site based management as *a process to be designed* (Mohrman, 1994; Wohlstetter and Mohrman, 1994) rather than as a program to be implemented. Instead of looking at the routinized adoption of a standard model (i.e., "site based management" means devolving decision making authority over budget, staffing, and curriculum to a site council made up of the principal, teachers, and perhaps parents), research needs to focus on how to fit site based processes into existing school system cultures and the ways to use this restructuring as a lever for improvement. This depends, in part, on devising ways to create forums that invite frank, open discourse on issues of importance to the school.

The research reported here involves school systems in the process of developing plans for implementing site based management. Building on principles of organizational architecture (Nadler and Tushman, 1992), these teams engaged in a structured participatory action research process to develop and address a set of "key questions" involved in designing their site based management processes. District planning teams were charged with designing comprehensive shared decision making policies that they felt would best work in their district. En route, they had to confront the dilemma described above: How do you equalize power and voice among the various stakeholders at the table to promote an authentic dialogue and inclusion among groups with inherently different roles?

How individual districts structure site based management makes a difference in

terms of whether the process yields expected results. Organization design was used as a metaphor to construct the planning process around the "key questions" involved in developing site based management processes. Galbraith (1977) explains that organization design is best seen as a strategic choice process. From this perspective, the complexity of a phenomenon like site based management can be broken down into smaller, component decisions for planning teams to discuss. Hackman (1987, p. 335) suggested a similar method, noting: "There are many ways to structure and manage teams, and one must actively think about and select among the available alternatives at each choice point. It is both inevitable and appropriate that these decisions will be guided as much by culture, political, and technical realities as by any normative model of team effectiveness."

Viewing the task at hand in terms of organizational design, it was hypothesized that by answering a set of key questions associated with site based practice, district planning teams could create a comprehensive set of parameters for implementing shared decision making. Planning team members applied their expert knowledge about their district, its culture and history, its strategic goals and the needs of its students, and integrated this with an understanding of the options available in designing site based practices. Each district's answers to the design options represent their beliefs about what will work in their district.

The initial framework used to develop the key questions was derived from Shedd and Bacharach (1991) and Shedd (1987), who hypothesized that the organizational design of site based systems can be described in terms of five dimensions:

- *Focus* refers to the ultimate purpose of the decentralized decision making

system. From a design perspective, how all other design issues are resolved is contingent on the definition of focus. That is, the design of site based systems is contingent on the espoused purpose.

- *Scope* refers to the nature of the subjects that site council participants discuss, and includes such factors as whether agreed upon goals exist, what types of issues councils address and how much power they have over these issues, the limits on site team authority, and other issues relating to the decision making power of the site team.
- *Formal structure* deals with which stakeholders are involved on site teams and how their roles are distributed. Structure includes such considerations as how many people serve on site teams, the mix of stakeholders, how individuals are selected to be on teams, and how the process is coordinated among schools and groups. Issues relating to whether individuals participate as delegates of their group, how team processes are coordinated with other existing decision making structures, and what type of leadership structure the site team uses to operate, may also be considered a part of structure.
- *Process* deals with how the site teams actually go about making decisions, and includes considerations like whether the teams use a structured or sequential decision making and planning methodology, how they go about arriving at final decisions, and the methods teams use for conflict resolution.
- *Support* includes many of the issues referred to in the literature as "capacity." These may be thought of as the resources available to teams to assist them in

their work. Support includes whether adequate information, time and training are provided, whether management supports the site based project, and whether teams have adequate authority to make decisions. The specification of accountability mechanisms may also be included as a support issue.

From a design perspective, the implementation of site based management is not considered simply "plugging in" the standard definition of site based management. Instead, it involves a strategic choice of the processes that best fit with the organization's goals, existing organizational structures and processes, human resource capabilities, the district's and school's history and experiences with collaborative processes, and other contextual factors.

Methods and Data Sources

The actual planning was conducted using a structured participatory action research process adapting Schein's (1992) clinical research model to the present circumstances. Schein's clinical research model is founded on the idea that organizational members will reveal themselves in a forum guided by a consultant / clinician who is invited into the organization to assist in solving an important organizational problem. The consultant / clinician is psychologically licensed to structure the dialogue and ask questions to uncover important data needed in problem solving and decision making. It is assumed that organizational insiders are capable of making their thoughts and feelings explicit, but that they need an outsider's help in doing this. The consultant / clinician operates in a process consultation model, guiding the conversation while avoiding controlling the content of the group's discussion. In short, the "outsider" provides a structure to the

discussion by posing relevant questions, some "rules of the game" that license participants to be full and equal participants, and facilitates the dialogue. It should be noted that Schein's model assumes that participants are motivated themselves to fulfill the task at hand. In the present case, then, it is assumed that planning team members desire to create their district's plan for implementing site based management.

The design process was used with a total of twenty New York districts to prepare district plans under the state's mandated adoption of site based management (Commissioner's Regulation 100.11). Each design team included *at a minimum* the superintendent or his/her designee, representatives of administrators and teachers selected by their collective bargaining unit, and representatives of parents selected by school-related parent organizations. Most teams also included representatives of support staff groups, and several included students.

The districts involved represent a convenience sample; experiences cited are not intended to be representative of all districts in New York (or elsewhere). Since the experiences that form the basis of the discussion here are used to suggest possible ways to address the problem of leveling the playing field, this should not represent a problem. (Demographic information about the sample is presented in Bauer, 1996). It is not the intent of this work to match certain district characteristics with particular designs; indeed, the framework used here suggests that each district's design must account for its history, organizational culture, strategic goals, and so on, in developing its site based plans, and thus the ways a district might address the issue will be somewhat idiosyncratic. It is our purpose to provide some suggestions, not absolute answers.

Leveling the Playing Field

Two separate discussions follow that deal with ways teams devised to "level the playing field" and equalize power across stakeholder groups engaged in shared decision making. First, the experiences of district planning teams engaged in designing shared decision making (the *design teams*) will be used in discussing the ways they dealt with the inherent power differences and the "rules of the game" they employed to promote shared voice. We will then shift focus to examine the outcomes of design team discussions, that is, the "rules of the game" the design teams developed to promote a level playing field on site based teams.

How the design teams worked

Webber (1994), in a discussion of Senge's *Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, emphasizes that in the knowledge economy, "work" is about meaningful dialogue. That is, the primary tool for organizational learning, for innovation, and for change, is conversation. Similarly, Webb, Corbett, and Wilson (1993) observed: "The essence of conversation is establishing a forum where all actors can hear and be heard on an equal basis" (p. 213). Regrettably, most chances individuals have to engage in an open dialogue occur within rather than across stakeholder groups, and due to the traditional isolation of professionals in schools, precious little conversation occurs within many groups. Weiss (1993) also emphasized the importance of dialogue to organizational learning and change:

> The organization learns only when it domesticates new knowledge, pokes it and shapes it and adds its own brand of seasoning. The new knowledge has to be shared, its meaning for the organization has to be constructed through interactive discourse, and it has to be accepted by a consensus in the organization (p. 88).

Drawing on the work of Friere, Bolin (1989) uses the term "authentic dialogue" to refer to the situation in which all stakeholders have influence in setting goals and making decisions. Authentic dialogue is part and parcel of empowerment; it allows individual stakeholders to contribute their own best thinking to discussions, and thus factor their expertise and experience into decisions. As Senge (1990) put it, the purpose of dialogue is to go beyond a single individual's understanding. Authentic dialogue makes learning possible, and allows the team to gain insights and ideas that individuals alone could not achieve.

In order to be a useful tool for districts, site based management must provide a forum for authentic dialogue. That is, all stakeholders need to exercise relatively equal influence over the decisions of site based teams, and open communication must be promoted among team members. However, two hurdles exist. First, actors on teams occupy very different positions in the organization: administrators and their subordinates, professionals and parents shared seats on site councils. Second, team members are often selected by their stakeholder groups. Like any other interest groups, representatives come to the table with their own unique perspectives and their own agendas (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981). Interest group politics come to bear as representatives of the various stakeholder groups seek to legitimize their perspectives and insure that decisions reflect the hopes and concerns of these groups.

Garvin (1993) makes the point that the first step toward a learning organization is fostering and environment that is conducive to learning. David (1991) suggests that to promote real discussion about restructuring, individuals need "an invitation to change."

This invitation is embodied in whether authority and flexibility are provided to stakeholders, and whether participants are afforded the ability to engage in the change process. Certain fundamental guidelines were developed to promote authentic dialogue and build trust around the table for the district-level design teams.

To be successful, the process teams used to engage in discussion and develop their definitions of "shared decision making" had to respect participants' expert knowledge about their district and their legitimate role at the table. Furthermore, it had to create a context where stakeholders perceived it to be safe to voice their opinions and concerns.

Trust is essential to successful collaboration. That is, an effective shared decision making process promotes trust among participants. Tarter, Bliss and Hoy (1989) define trust as "the work group's generalized expectancy that the words, actions, and/or written statements of another individual, group, or organization can be relied upon." Rosow and his colleagues (1989) assert that trust is an essential part of any discussion among stakeholders, and Spanbauer (1992) identifies trust as a key to effective teamwork. He believes that having well-defined communication rules promotes trust and open discussion among individuals on teams.

Initially, to begin the dialogue about equalizing power around the table, planning team members were introduced to the concept of trust using Stephen Covey's (1989) work as a model. Covey uses the metaphor of the "emotional bank account" to discuss ways trust may be built in interpersonal relationships. First, he makes the point that trust is built over time, and that each interaction with an individual is an opportunity to build trust (i.e., to make a deposit in the emotional bank account). All discussions among

planning team members as well as interactions with stakeholders in the district represent opportunities to build trust. There are six fundamental "deposits" in the emotional bank account:

- Demonstrating an understanding of the individual and empathizing with his/her concerns.
- Attending to the little things - small courtesies and kindnesses.
- Keeping commitment.
- Clarifying expectations.
- Showing personal integrity.
- Apologizing sincerely when you make a withdrawal.

Using Covey's notion, the more often and consistently planning team members make "deposits" among themselves and with members of their school communities, the more they are perceived as trustworthy and the more likely authentic dialogue will occur. Planning team members discussed the implications of these notions in terms of their communications with one another and in terms of the planning team's relationship with stakeholder groups in the district. It was emphasized that to non-planning team members, the district planning team was a "new player" and as such, the team had to prove itself to be trustworthy through its interactions. In short, the "emotional bank account" had a zero balance when the teams started their work, and guidelines were put in place to ensure that "deposits" would be forthcoming.

From this discussion, three operational guidelines were developed and discussed with planning teams to promote trust and open interaction. First, Wilson et al. (1994)

make the point that the most powerful act of leadership is modeling the behaviors expected of others. The district planning teams were asked to consider themselves their district's first shared decision making team and leaders in the process of restructuring. As such, they were asked to make their best attempt to act as models of what they considered to be effective shared decision making. They were reminded that as planning team members, they had responsibilities both to the team and to their stakeholder groups. Attributes of effective communication were reviewed, and in some cases teams established a code of conduct that represented their mutual agreement on proper team behavior.

Second, since the district planning teams were models and because their open and honest communication was critical to success, consensus decision making was adopted for all planning team discussions. Each team received training in consensus building. Under the model used (OAP, 1989), a consensus was reached when each member of the planning team present at a meeting agreed with the following questions:

- I can live with the decision.
- I understand the decision; it is clear, concrete and specific.
- I contributed to the decision.
- I will support the decision and do what I can to make it work.

If any single member of the planning team could not answer "yes" to any of these four questions, the decision was not final. In turn, any member holding up a decision was expected to discuss why the decision was problematic, how any deficiencies could be overcome, or what he/she would prefer as an alternative.

The value of consensus as a model for planning teams is that it is the single decision method that equalizes power around the table. That is, in a consensus process, the superintendent, a parent, teacher, or student on the planning team has equal power and equal voice in the final decision. Any member can "hold up" a decision, express his or her reservations, and bring concerns to the attention of others. Furthermore, it was considered beneficial to be able to deliver to each board of education a district plan that represented a consensus recommendation of the planning team. Consensus takes time and energy; it is slower and more deliberate than other decision methods, but it also forced the teams to consider each key design decision carefully and fully. All planning teams endorsed and used this method in their decision making.

The last guideline dealt with communication and feedback. Duck (1993) emphasized the need for communication during an organizational change such as restructuring decision making. When communication is delayed, people are prevented from developing an understanding of the design principles that guide decision making, the trade-offs made in the design process, and the decisions that the planning team reached. By failing to communicate, design teams "unwittingly prevent people who are expected to implement the change from participating or buying in" (p. 110). During change efforts, rumors often run rampant. Furthermore, "People in the organization may need to hear a message over and over before they believe that this time, the call for change is not just a whim or a passing fancy" (p. 111).

Effective shared decision making is an open process, and the planning teams were encouraged to communicate frequently with members of the school district community

throughout the design process. Individual stakeholder groups were kept apprised of the team's progress by their representatives at the table. In addition, the team as a whole was responsible for devising formal mechanisms for seeking feedback from members of the school community and incorporating their ideas into the planning team's work. The methods used varied: some teams published drafts of their plans in school and district newsletters, others held information sessions periodically, and planning team members made presentations at faculty, P.T.A., Chamber of Commerce, and other groups' regular meetings. The format used was as individual as the districts involved, but the important point is that the teams sought input and received feedback in an ongoing fashion. Through this process, they built an awareness about what shared decision making would be in their district, and began the process of "selling" their plans to future building team members. They also promoted a sense of inclusion and empowerment critical to equalizing power around the table.

Designs for Promoting Equal Voice on Site Based Teams

The discussion to this point has focused on how the district level design teams worked to equalize power around the table; here, we will deal with the guidelines they devised for decision making teams that they hypothesized would promote equal voice and power at the school level. First, it deserves to be mentioned that the design process used in these districts was itself intended to promote equal voice by providing prospective site team members with a realistic preview of what it means to serve on a school decision making team. The importance of clarifying these "rules of the game" cannot be overstated; the goals and operating procedures associated with site based processes are

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generally left ambiguous (Bauer, 1996; Malen and Ogawa, 1992; Weiss, Cambone and Wyeth, 1992; Hallinger and Hausman, 1993), leaving teams to devise their own methods and speculate about what they are "supposed to be doing." This often results in confusion, power-plays, and a focus on "adult" or stakeholder group interests rather than issues related to student performance and achievement.

Kanter (1982, p. 248) makes the point that participation, like any organizational process, needs to be managed: "True 'freedom' is not the absence of structure - letting the employees go off and do what they want - but rather a clear structure which enables people to work within established boundaries in an autonomous and creative way." Duck (1993) makes a similar point when she observes that empowerment should not mean "abandonment," that giving teams the permission to make decisions without clear guidelines and an understanding of the organization's expectations sets them up for failure. "Predictability," she says, "consists of intentions and ground rules: What are our general goals and how will we make decisions?" (p. 115)

The premise of the design process was that by answering each of the key questions in the areas of focus, scope, structure, process, and support, a comprehensive set of guidelines for site based teams can be created. That is, in the ideal case a planning team could develop answers to all key questions and thus create a plan for implementing shared decision making that provided a realistic preview of what would be expected of the school teams, a framework for team activity, and the provision of needed resources. Instead of viewing shared decision making as a "program to do" or the ritualized implementation of a "standard" model of site based management, the planning teams

exercised their judgment regarding what was necessary to effectively implement shared decision making and what would "fit" their district culture. Thus, the first method used to promote equal voice at the school level was the development of the shared decision making plan itself. The plan was intended to lessen ambiguity as well as provide individuals with a realistic basis for deciding whether they wanted to serve on teams.

Within the plans, design teams also tried to answer questions related to focus, scope, structure, process, and support that would contribute to leveling the playing field and promoting ongoing, authentic dialogue. (Table 1 displays the various questions teams addressed under each area.). Naturally, one might suspect that issues relating to structure would be central to leveling the playing field since these decisions have to do with who serves on site based teams and how team members are selected. However, experience with the design teams showed that broadening participation and leveling the playing field involved a good deal more than just including more people in decisions. For purposes of this paper, we will focus on areas that are less apparently related to equalizing voice, issues relating to focus, scope, and decision making process.

-- insert table 1 --

Focus

The importance of defining some sense of "future" is seldom questioned in the organizational literature. For example, Vaill (1984, p. 85) wrote: "The definition and clarification of purposes is both a fundamental step in effective strategic management and is a prominent feature of every high-performing system." Senge (1990) talks about vision as a key component of learning organizations; without it, there can be no motivation to

Table 1: Strategic Design Questions

Dimension	Key Questions
Focus	What are the long-term expectations for SBDM?
Scope	What issues will teams address? What authority will they have on these issues? What are the broad limits on decision making?
Structure	What schools or units will be involved? Who will serve on the site based teams? How will they be selected? How long will they serve? Will "alternates" be available to fill-in for members? How will teams communicate with members of school community? How will teams coordinate their activities with existing committees? How will SBDM be coordinated with overall district change activity and how will the process be evaluated?
Process	Will a defined or sequential decision method be used? How will the team make final decisions? How will conflicts be resolved?
Support/ Capacity	What has been done to ensure the support of policy makers, administrators, and stakeholder groups? What resources will be provided to ensure team success? Training (initial and ongoing), time, clerical support, money, information/data Accountability and evaluation

learn, create, or change. Goold (1992, p. 351) adds that for decentralized structures to work effectively, strategic goals and objectives, measures of these goals, and performance standards must be agreed upon. "Without clear goals," he writes, "the whole concept of decentralized responsibility suffers, since the conditions under which the business head can expect to operate free from central intervention are ill-defined." Finally, Weick and McDaniel (1989) make the point that in professional organizations like schools, a clear sense of purpose and organizational values is important not only to motivate change, but also to guide decision making in the face of uncertainty. Vision is essential to coordination across a school system and to accountability; there can be no legitimate judgment of the efficacy of actions and decisions without an agreed upon sense of future.

Education theorists and researchers have likewise embraced the importance of vision to organizational change and renewal. For instance, Sergiovanni (1989) emphasizes the leader's role in facilitating the creation of a vision; Glickman (1993) calls vision "a cause beyond oneself" (15), and believes that it is necessary to harness the energy and resources needed to improve schools. In his work on school improvement, he urges schools to develop a "covenant" that represents the centerpiece of improvement activity, a "sacred obligation" to the values and characteristics of teaching and learning the school participants seek to create. Schlechty (1991) likewise emphasized the role of leadership in establishing a sense of purpose, and added that without clear purpose, organizational actors involved in change processes have little capacity to determine whether their actions are worthwhile.

Focus deals with the long-term purposed associated with shared decision making.

Design teams each defined a specific focus for shared decision making relating to student performance and achievement, most often defined as learning outcomes that the school was seeking to attain. This was used as the centerpiece of the design process. That is, all other design decisions flowed from this "focus." The idea behind this was simple: if we espouse to implement shared decision making to promote success for all students, we need to define what we mean by this and design processes with this end in mind.

In terms of equalizing voice and promoting a level playing field, having a specific, district-endorsed set of student-related goals defined why stakeholders joined the shared decision making team and what they would be accountable for attaining. In this sense, it enabled all stakeholders to define a common set of goals they could all commit to discussing. It helped define the appropriate balance between central control, on the one hand, and building autonomy. Finally, it also helped define the balance between the site based team's activities and the interests of stakeholder groups. In this sense, focus helped define the site team's role as change agent, provided a clear and elevating purpose stakeholders could share, and defined clear boundaries for team activity.

Scope

Scope deals with questions relating to the types of issues site teams address, what authority they have over these issues, and the limits on their decision making. These issues are typically the source of a degree of fear among stakeholders; they deal directly with the power of the team versus the power vested in individual stakeholders. Central administrators fear losing power to the schools; principals fear losing power to the site councils (Rosow et al., 1989); teachers sometimes fear not being genuinely involved

(Bacharach and Conley, 1989), losing power to parents and reduced autonomy in the classroom as a result of school level decision making; and parents fear that they will be cut out of the dialogue altogether (Bauer, 1996).

The literature seems to deal with questions of scope in a vacuum, as if the issues subject to site based decision making and the authority vested in teams fully defines site based management. Here, scope flows from a design team's definition of focus, and is thus related to goals associated with student performance and achievement. The issues subject to site based decision making and planning relate to long-term goals, and all decision must contribute to these goals rather than an individual's or stakeholder group's agenda.

Two issues related to scope were particularly important to design teams in promoting a level playing field. The first had to do with the authority of the teams to make final decisions. Prior to settling the question of authority, planning teams gave some preliminary consideration to the question of how site teams would make their final decisions, an issue related to decision process.

As mentioned earlier, in a consensus process, the question of balancing team authority against the right of school administrators to control decisions becomes a moot point. That is, if all team members must agree by consensus before a decision is final, in effect all team members may exercise a veto. The school principal (if he or she is a team member) cannot be "out voted" by other stakeholders, but rather all team members have an equal right to object and hold up a decision. All design teams endorsed the use of consensus in site team decision making, thus many fears about shifts in power from the

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school administrator to the team were allayed.

Consensus also resolves many concerns about the types of issues teams may exercise authority over since all members agree to support a decision when they agree to it by consensus. If members agree to a decision by consensus, and someone on the team as a part of their regular role in the school has authority to implement the decision, then it stands to reason that the team has the authority to implement the decision. As an example, if the building principal has the authority to control the expenditure of funds allocated to the school for staff development and the team agrees that a particular staff development program ought to be held, the program can be conducted within budget, and there is no other reason prohibiting the program, by agreeing to support the decision the principal has "lent" his or her authority to the team, and the decision is final. If, on the other hand, the team required additional money beyond the budgeted amount to conduct the program, the team's decision could not be final unless it procured the necessary funding some other way (or unless the district plan gave the team the authority to allocate funds not already in the budget).

Using this principle, the planning teams universally endorsed the idea of leaving the question of what issues teams may address up to the teams, providing that they were pursuing the defined focus of shared decision making. Their authority was defined in terms of consensus; that is, teams could exercise a final say on any issue that any team member has the authority to make, provided that they agree by consensus to support the decision. This "rule of the game," perhaps more than any other, levels the playing field and promotes equal say.

Second, the literature on site based management seldom distinguishes between forms of power (Conley, 1991). Many fears about power stem from defining power purely in terms of authority, and in zero-sum terms. Authority is a finite quantity; the more authority the team has, the less other actors have (Shedd and Bacharach, 1991). But teams may also exercise influence over decisions, that is, they may contribute to a decision made by others in pursuit of shared goals.

Design teams examined both authority and influence, and agreed with the notion that for any issue beyond the site team's formal authority, they could make a recommendation to decision makers or seek a waiver of established policy. To this end, formal procedures for seeking approval for recommendations were drafted, spelling out the team's responsibilities, timelines for approval, and decision maker's responsibilities to engage in meaningful dialogue with the teams. This is intended to expand the site team's sphere of operation while avoiding power struggles, and may in the long run broaden collaboration. Whenever a team makes a recommendation, they are in effect including other decision makers in their consensus processes.

Process

Process has to do with how teams actually arrive at shared decisions. Earlier, we discussed the importance of the selection of consensus as the method used to arrive at final decisions and how this serves to level the playing field. Here, we will discuss two related process issue: what does a consensus team do if members are absent, and how conflicts are resolved in a fair and equitable manner.

A consensus decision involves everyone agreeing (at least) that they can live with

the team's decision and that they will support it. The term "consensus" comes from the Latin, *sentiere* which means "to feel," coupled with the prefix "con" meaning "together or with" (Reavis and Griffith, 1992). Consensus is typically used when it is important to have all participant's input into a decision, and when commitment is perceived as critical to successful implementation. As Hill (1992, p. 82) noted, "Consensus is an interpersonal decision making process which permits each member involved to have his or her point of view actively listened to. The final outcome of consensus is one in which each member can see a deeper level of common meaning or value." Through consensus, participants develop a deep level of understanding of a decision and the rationale for selecting it from among alternatives. "Consensus is a result of a discussion between team members that reflects a *willingness* to actively support the group's decision," Plunkett and Fournier (1991, p. 36) observe. "It does not necessarily mean that all members are in agreement. It means the disagreement is *not* sufficiently rooted that any member will *not* try to make the decision work."

As already mentioned, the primary advantage of consensus is that all team members exercise equal power and have equal voice in the decision process, alternatives are discussed thoroughly, and quite often potential barriers to implementation are anticipated en route to a decision. In this sense, the primary flaw with consensus is a virtue, that is, it is unlikely that a team can rush to a consensus decision. Rosow et al. (1989) make the point that while it takes more time to make a consensus decision, it is often easier to carry it out because commitment and enthusiasm have been developed through the decision making process itself.

First, consensus requires that members attend meetings, engage in discussion and information gathering, and accept accountability for a team decision. Under the definition cited earlier, a consensus is reached when all team members present at a meeting agree to support the decision. However, according to the decisions typically adopted under scope, a proviso to this needed to be adopted to effectively protect individual decision makers and equalize power: if the authority of a team member is needed to implement a decision and that person is not at a meeting, the consensus decision cannot be finalized until that member is present. In one district, in fact, the design team reasoned that to equalize power, no consensus decision could be finalized until all members were present or contacted and agreed to the decision. Others adopted a "two meeting rule," stating that all decisions would receive a second reading at a subsequent meeting, at which time the decision would be finalized. This serves to protect absent members from having the team impose a decision against their will while balancing the team's legitimate need to get on with business.

Second, adopting consensus as a decision methodology involves living with the reality that a decision may be blocked by any team. To effectively equalize the playing field among stakeholders involved in shared decision making, while promoting progress in team decision making, design teams addressed the issue of what would happen if a team was "stuck." It was agreed that the worst case scenario would be to ignore this issue entirely; if an individual on a team team usurped the team's power in a conflict situation, or if a "stuck" team tried to devise a process for getting "unstuck" while it was in conflict, collaborative processes would likely break down.

This is a difficult matter, and one that is very much tied to the question of leveling the playing field. The literature suggests several useful mechanisms to resolving blocks in consensus. For instance, Katzenbach and Smith (1993) discuss several ways teams can "get unstuck," including revisiting their goals and purpose; taking advantage of outside facilitators or training; altering the team's membership in some fashion; or injecting new information or approaches to a problem. Quite often, fresh facts or new perspectives allow teams to generate additional alternatives to an issue. Chance (1992) observed that conflict often emerges when there is an unequal distribution of information among site team members, and thus he affirms the notion that injecting new information may be an effective way to resolve a block in consensus decision making.

Planning teams discussed various options, including whether site teams should abandon consensus when they are "stuck." The question of resolving a block in consensus required planning teams to balance the integrity of the consensus process against team productivity. The primary virtue of consensus is that each individual's voice and power is equal. Advocating a conflict resolution method that allowed site teams a "quick out" when there is a block, such as resorting to majority vote, risks enabling those in the majority to subvert the consensus process in order to "win" on an issue. Whenever it appears that a majority of the team prefers a certain outcome, they could declare an impasse and enforce their decision. Clearly, this is not an acceptable alternative. On the other hand, though, it is equally unacceptable for a team to remain "stuck" for any significant length of time. For some decisions, it is conceivable that a site team might take months to get past a block. Consensus, by its very nature, risks creating a

dictatorship of the minority opinion; in theory any single member can hold up a decision forever.

Like other design decisions, there is no single, best answer for this issue, although most planning teams agreed that preserving the integrity of the consensus process was important. In discussing this issue, teams distinguished between two different types of blocks in consensus: first, what should site teams do when they are unable to come to a decision on an issue that they have total control over, and second, what should they do when a decision must be made by a certain date? The very nature of the options available differ between these two scenarios. When there is an externally imposed deadline associated with a decision, failing to make a decision has different consequences for the team, their school and their students. For example, if a team is deliberating on whether to apply for a grant that has a particular deadline and they remain blocked, they may miss the opportunity to apply for the grant. If a team remains deadlocked on an issue involving a budget recommendation, the budget will be cast without their input and they may miss a chance to implement a particular program or to procure needed resources.

According to all districts' focus and scope decisions, site teams are involved in school improvement rather than day-to-day administration, and thus it is unlikely that they will be involved in many decisions that have deadlines associated with them. For the most part the pace at which they generate improvement is up to them. Nonetheless, most planning teams created a conflict resolution process to cover both situations. All teams developed schemes that provided several steps for teams to use, adopting several of the ideas suggested in the literature, and they attempted to take advantage of existing

resources by integrating these into their processes. For instance, a first step might involve gathering additional data, involving stakeholder groups, or inviting outsiders to make presentations to the group. As second might involve creating subcommittees to develop action alternatives, and a third might involve inviting into the group meeting an outsider versed in conflict resolution techniques to facilitate group meetings. If a team went through these stages and was still blocked, for decisions that had no external time constraint most design teams agreed that school teams should table the decision and agree to a time to come back to it.

For those decisions that had deadlines, the designs boil down to selecting an alternative decision methodology to consensus. If a team agrees that it is legitimately stuck, and a decision must be made by a certain date, it can either allow the deadline to pass, resolve the matter with a majority or some other type of vote, or allow an individual decision maker to make the decision. In most cases, a single decision maker was instructed to take control of the final decision. When this option was considered preferable to a vote, the rationale was that only a centrist decision could provide clear accountability.

It deserves to be mentioned that all planning teams agreed that there is no "good" option for this design decision. The processes created are meant to deal with an aberration, a scenario that can only come about when the consensus process breaks down to a significant degree. The balance on this issue becomes the ability of the team to make progress on its mission versus the rights of individual team members in a consensus process. In keeping with the basic premise of the design process, site teams are provided

with a set of steps to follow should this situation occur so that they do not need to determine on their own, in the midst of a conflict, what they are supposed to do to resolve the situation.

Summary

Shedd and Bacharach (1991) describe the "skillful practitioner" as a person who is able to use established knowledge and theory in analyzing problems in real life situations to develop alternatives for action. Using the design metaphor and the key questions provided practitioners with a forum for learning alternative theories of action regarding the implementation of shared decision making, discussing their likely effectiveness in their district, and engaging in a process of strategic choice to determine what would work in their organizational setting. Through this process, they developed "rules of the game" that first allowed them to "level the playing field" in terms of decision making power in their work as design team members, and then to develop methods they felt would serve the same purpose in promoting true shared decision making at the school level.

Decisions other than those discussed above may contribute the leveling the playing field. Indeed, we purposefully ignored issues relating to stucture (e.g., how teams selected their members, the role definition for "team member") and such things as rules for defining team accountability. It is important, though, to emphasize that creating a forum for authentic dialogue involves more than assembling a larger group or a more diverse group. In fact, viewing shared decision making solely in these terms seems unlikely to shift power or equalize voice, a point consistently made by those who argue that restructuring alone is not sufficient to change schools and that districts must take steps to

reculture (Fullan, 1993; Elmore, 1995; Wonycott-Kytle and Bogotch, 1997).

Fullan (1993) stressed the notion that change is a journey rather than a blueprint. In answering the key questions and developing their plans for implementing shared decision making, the planning teams were establishing their "best guess" about what would work in their districts. As stated earlier, the plans represent an hypothesis about what would best "fit" each district, and planning teams were encouraged to view their shared decision making parameters as "works in progress." Perhaps Prestine (1993, p. 59) put it most clearly: "While careful planning is essential, the best laid plans are always based on what is known and understood at the time. There should be an expectation that things will go awry as the accumulation of knowledge and wisdom progresses."

Results indicate that it may be possible to specify detailed "rules of the game" that guide site council communication and decision making, and that many of the dilemmas predicted in the literature may be anticipated and thus avoided by providing a realistic preview to participants. What is reported here includes the concerns and anticipated frustrations of twenty planning teams, their resolutions to these, and a summary of the experience of these twenty teams in creating an open dialogue during their own deliberations. Essentially, these "rules of the game" are meant to address the need to reculture, to affect the belief-states of participants engaged in shared decision making and provide them with assurance that their voice will be heard.

Many of these decisions are reported here are works in progress; the procedures adopted for use with the design teams themselves produced their intended effect, but the effectiveness of the decisions devised by the design teams for school based teams to use

has yet to be determined. The research reported here is intended to make a contribution to our understanding of ways we might promote trust and equalize power among participants involved in shared decision making, and thus lay the groundwork for creating this type of environment.

David (1991) suggests that to promote real discussion about restructuring, individuals need "an invitation to change." This invitation is embodied in whether authority and flexibility are provided to stakeholders, and whether participants are afforded the ability to engage in the change process. The contribution of this paper is the description of the development of a participatory action research methodology designed to provide this invitation, and the ways groups of educators devised to ensure that their voices would be heard.

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